

## COMMUNITY SCHOOLS

Each county in California operates a Court and Community Schools program. The San Luis Obispo County Office of Education (COE) operates one Court School and five Community Schools. The Court School provides classes for incarcerated youth at the locked juvenile detention center. The Community Schools are for students who have either been expelled or, for various other reasons, removed from their local school and school district. Most have been placed in Community Schools for truancy. Many of the students at Community Schools are also on probation. The Probation Department stations probation officers at each Community School for the purposes of enforcing truancy laws and providing case management. Community School students are considered to be a high-risk group.

### ***Community and Continuation Schools Differences:***

The County Office of Education's *community* schools are not to be confused with *continuation* high schools operated by the school districts. Continuation high schools are alternative educational opportunities for students who may have dropped out or been unsuccessful for a variety of reasons in their local public schools and need to make up academic credits towards receiving a high school diploma. Local school districts have a half-day continuation program for students in grades nine through twelve. Students need to be at least 16 years old in order to attend. Attendance at continuation school is voluntary. Local school authorities then must approve the request before students are allowed to attend. Once a student makes up deficient credits, he or she may request to return to the regular high school in order to graduate with fellow students, or opt to remain and graduate from the continuation high school. *Continuation* schools are run by local school districts whereas *community* schools are operated by the County Office of Education. Enrollment at both is voluntary, but *community* schools accepts students grades 7 through 12 who have been expelled, are severely credit deficient, or who have behavior problems and would not qualify for *continuation* schools.

## ORIGIN

The Grand Jury chose to examine the Court and Community Schools because they had not been reviewed recently. We were concerned there was a need to shed light on a little known

education function in the county. Additionally we wanted to see if a regular high school program emphasizing college preparation is realistic for high-risk students – would this program *leave some students behind*?

## **METHOD**

The Grand Jury interviewed COE officials, teachers, administrators and students at Community Schools, Probation officers, and visited Community Schools and the Court School. We also held a series of roundtable discussions with representatives from COE, County Probation Department, the Regional Occupation Program, County General Services, the Private Industry Council, and Assemblyman Blakeslee's office. Telephone interviews were also conducted with the California Department of Education.

## **AUTHORITY**

California Penal Code §925 states: The grand jury shall investigate and report on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments, or functions of the county including those operations, accounts, and records of any special legislative district or other district in the county created pursuant to state law for which the officers of the county are serving in their ex officio capacity as officers of the districts.

California Penal Code §925a states: The grand jury may at any time examine the books and records of any incorporated city or joint powers agency located in the county. In addition to any other investigatory powers granted by this chapter, the grand jury may investigate and report upon the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments, functions, and the method or system of performing the duties of any such city or joint powers agency and make such recommendations as it may deem proper and fit.

The grand jury may investigate and report upon the needs of all joint powers agencies in the county, including the abolition or creation of agencies and the equipment for, or the method or system of performing the duties of, the several agencies. It shall cause a copy of any such report to be transmitted to the governing body of any affected agency. As used in this section, "joint powers agency" means an agency described in Section 6506 of the Government Code whose jurisdiction encompasses all or part of a county.

California Penal Code §928 states: “Every grand jury may investigate and report upon the needs of all county officers in the county, including the abolition or creation of offices and the equipment for, or the method or system of performing the duties of, the several offices. Such investigation and report shall be conducted selectively each year. The grand jury shall cause a copy of such report to be transmitted to each member of the board of supervisors of the county.

## **NARRATIVE**

The emphasis of this report is on the need to prepare high-risk youth to lead useful and productive lives, and to stay out of trouble after leaving school. The best way to do that is to prepare them to enter the workforce. The Grand Jury agrees that vocational education is a means to accomplish this and is a viable alternative to college preparation for some students.

### ***The What and Why of Community Schools:***

Students are referred to Community Schools from their district schools due to a range of serious circumstances, including repeated behavior problems, chronic truancy, expulsion, and/or other indicators of a failure to thrive within the traditional educational system. In short, Court and Community Schools serve as a “last resort” for our county’s most troubled teens. Educators agree that many youth who end up in Court and Community Schools describe feelings of personal failure, a disconnect between learning and real life, and an overall lack of a sense of future direction that have confounded their ability to achieve in school. Educators also report that many of the youth come from dysfunctional families.

Community Schools provide standards-based instruction for students seventh through twelfth grade. The standards taught are the same classes as in district schools and conform to all state requirements. Some students eventually return to their district school while others may stay at Community School until they either reach age eighteen or complete high school. Community Schools can confer high school diplomas on students who complete the state-mandated course work and pass the exit examination. They can also assign a certificate of completion to students who do not pass the exit examination but do complete the required courses and hours of instruction.

Because of the troubled nature of some of these students, and their history of failure in class work, a significant number do not receive diplomas. For this group, opportunities after leaving school are severely limited. Many have already been exposed to the gang and drug worlds and may find this an easy path to get money and achieve recognition. These students are at risk of a lifetime spent going in and out a revolving door in the justice system.

Law enforcement, education, and correctional experts all agree that the best way to keep juvenile delinquents from becoming adult criminals is to provide them with the opportunity to become productive members of the community. To do this, they need both a positive work ethic and job skills.

### ***Job Training Courses:***

The Regional Occupation Program (ROP) is a state-funded program, which provides students who remain in the traditional school system with vocational education and job training. The currently correct term for vocational training is “Career Technical Education” (CTE). (We will use both the more traditional *vocational education/training* terminology and CTE throughout this report.) Through the ROP classes students can learn specific trade and job skills such as culinary arts, mechanics, woodworking and other construction skills. However, this program is not available for Community School students.

The ROP is governed by a board comprised of representatives of each of the seven county school districts in the county who determine the distribution of ROP resources throughout the county. Because these resources are limited, it is not possible to meet all the needs of the regular school system. Thus, the possibility of ROP addressing the needs of the Community Schools is remote.

Court and Community School students stand to benefit immensely from a positive career education experience. However, existing opportunities available through CTE systems are not appropriate for most Court or Community School students for three primary reasons: First, because students in this program have been expelled from school, they are, by law, not

permitted on campus at schools that offer ROP classes. Second, CTE programs often include academic prerequisites that many Court and Community Schools students with histories of truancy and academic failure do not have. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Court and Community School students have typically reached an emotional “rock bottom” by the time they reach this alternative school program. Most are not immediately receptive or prepared to succeed in a traditional CTE context.

If Community Schools are to offer any type of job or work training, the program needs to be tailored specifically to the needs and abilities of this population and funds must come from a separate, dedicated source – i.e., the Private Industry Council.

***Private Industry Council Funds:***

The Private Industry Council (PIC) is a not-for-profit corporation, which is governed by a five-member board of directors. PIC receives and spends federal funds designated by the Workforce Investment Act for development of the workforce. These funds are distributed by the US Department of Labor and are funneled down to the county level through the state. The county's Workforce Investment Board, appointed by the Board of Supervisors and composed of members drawn at least 51% from private industry, has oversight responsibility for PIC.

PIC has provided the COE Community Schools with funding for a pilot project to develop a basic course designed to prepare students to enter the workforce. This project is currently conducted only at the San Luis Obispo Community School site. There is one full-time instructor and one full time job placement specialist who teach and supervise the class.

The program is known as WORK (World of Real Knowledge), and was launched in September 2005 with partial start-up support through Workforce Investment Act funds. This “one-room school within a school” serves up to twenty 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade Community School students who volunteer to participate in the program. The focus of this course of study is on exposing students to the world of work through multiple contexts, both in the classroom and the real world. The program is built around the following strategies:

- 〈 Using **core curriculum to examine work-related topics** (e.g. budgeting in math class,

cover letters in English/language arts class, the history of labor/management relations in social studies class),

- ⟨ Inviting **weekly speakers from a variety of professions** to visit the class and share with students what they do and the paths they took to establish their careers,
- ⟨ Establishing a **job shadowing** experience for all student participants who successfully complete the first semester of the program,
- ⟨ Arranging **co-enrollment in courses at Cuesta College** for select students,
- ⟨ Enlisting a **campus-based job developer** for liaison between students and prospective employers, and
- ⟨ Developing **collaborative partnerships with employer groups** such as trade unions, industry associations, and business groups.

The WORK program does not actually teach specific job or work skills. Rather, it is designed to teach the fundamentals of what it means to work. It covers topics such as the need to dress appropriately, show up for work on time, get along with co-workers, and have a positive attitude, cleanliness and personal hygiene. These are necessary steps in preparing students for the work world, and in many cases is their first exposure to these concepts as important elements of everyday life.

Two issues must now be dealt with to secure the future of the WORK program: how to continue the current WORK program and how to provide these students with the next level of skills required to enter the workforce.

### ***Cost of the Program:***

Funding for each twenty-student group is estimated at \$50,000 (or \$2,500 per student). If the program is to be expanded to both the north and south county campuses, the total cost would be approximately \$150,000.

According to those professionals interviewed, all agreed this is a wise investment, one that promises payoffs on many levels for both the county and the youth who are able to make positive turnarounds at this critical stage in their life. The potential alternative cost to society,

which could be incurred if these students are not able to find gainful employment as they age is much greater. We feel this may be a case of, “pay now or pay more later.”

***Possible PIC Funding Restrictions:***

PIC is restricted in its ability to supply funds for the WORK program due to federal regulations and the availability of funds. Federal regulations require funds be used only to benefit families with a maximum of \$7,200 earned annual income. This can represent a problem for some students enrolled in the program. However, there are other qualifying categories into which many students may fall and this may mitigate this restriction. It is not clear what effect this restriction will have on funding for the coming year.

Additional funding, and creative substitute forms of assistance such as described in the next section, must be identified and developed.

***A Role for the County:***

The County General Services Department employs people with a range of skills in many different occupational fields. This department is charged with maintaining virtually all county property. Jobs in the department range from building and grounds maintenance to many of the construction trades, park rangers, vehicle maintenance, and a host of administrative functions. Most jobs are full time, while some are part time or summer positions.

During our roundtable discussions, it was determined that it may be possible to either employ some students from the WORK program in this department or to allow them to at least observe work activities. This would provide some of the exposure to advanced job skills that are needed to round out the WORK program as well as add additional value to the benefits provided to the county by the General Services Department. There is, of course, a need to provide adequate supervision and oversight for students allowed to take part in the department's work activities. The Probation Department stated they would support this concept on an experimental basis and would be willing to cooperate in this endeavor by screening prospective participants and providing required supervision. If this concept can be implemented it would benefit both the students and the county.

### ***The Future and Funding:***

Because the WORK program has shown initial success, we feel that it should be expanded. Toward this end, additional funding must be sought. Funding is always a problem - and there is no easy answer. San Luis Obispo County has been first in a number of developments, which have later been adopted at the state level. There is reason to believe the WORK program could be a “first” which would have application statewide. It is a “pilot project” which addresses a problem common to all counties in the state.

Private industry also stands to benefit from a successful and expanded WORK program. Although PIC may have limited funds, PIC, as an organization, is ideally suited to approach private industry sources to solicit additional funding and supplemental support for the program, and to administer any funds generated.

## **CONCLUSION**

The WORK program serves a specific need in the county and, for the dollars spent, has the potential of a very high return on investment – especially in the long run. The County Office of Education is to be highly commended for their efforts in creating this program. The Private Industry Council, the Probation Department, and the General Services Department should be recognized for their willingness to explore innovative ideas about how to make the program an even greater success.

The future of the WORK program depends on funding. Funding depends on the ability to create and pursue new and creative approaches to obtaining money for the program. It is time to think outside the box!

## **FINDINGS**

**Finding 1:** Students in Community Schools are high-risk youth and are less likely to be college bound.

**Finding 2:** State academic requirements are the same for Community School students as for

regular school district students.

**Finding 3:** There is a strong need, and a severe lack of funding, for vocational training in Community Schools.

**Finding 4:** Past communication and collaboration between various agencies in dealing with the Community School population and the need for vocational training was lacking. The roundtable approach to this inquiry has opened new lines of communication and cooperation between various agencies, which can benefit the students in the Community School program.

**Finding 5:** There is a need for adult mentors to help in introducing WORK program students to job experiences.

**Finding 6:** The County General Services Department has agreed to explore the possibility of cooperation in the WORK program.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Recommendation 1:** The WORK program should be continued and expanded to the next level (specific job skill exposure and training). (Findings 3 and 5)

**Recommendation 2:** The WORK program should be expanded to the north and south county Community School campuses when funds become available. (Finding 3)

**Recommendation 3:** COE and Probation should communicate frequently and keep each other informed of problems, progress, and needs of the Community Schools WORK program. Roundtable discussions involving the needs and developments in the Community Schools vocational training efforts should continue on a regular basis. (Finding 4)

**Recommendation 4:** COE should create a team with PIC to approach private industry to generate additional funding for continuation and expansion of the WORK program. Funding and alternative methods of support for the program can include job shadowing, OJT (On the Job Training), and dedicated financial sponsorship for groups of students. (Finding 4)

**Recommendation 5:** Probation Department should remain involved in efforts to continue and expand the WORK program and should cooperate with COE where and when possible. (Finding 4)

**Recommendation 6:** COE, Probation, and ROP professionals should work together to develop an approach to the state legislature to propose a pilot program in San Luis Obispo County. The pilot program should be designed to increase the availability of Career Technical Education for Community School students. (Findings 3 & 4)

**Recommendation 7:** The Probation Department should work with the General Services Department to identify and match students with job opportunities in the General Services Department and provide assistance in placing those students. (Finding 5 & 6)

**Recommendation 8:** This final recommendation requires some imaginative and very creative thinking on the part of COE, but no additional funding. COE should utilize their own existing facilities to create “job training” at Community School sites. (Finding 3)

### **REQUIRED RESPONSES**

- **The San Luis Obispo County Office of Education: Due 08/02/06 (Findings 1 through 5 and Recommendations 1, 2 3, 4, 6 & 8)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Board of Education: Due 09/06/06 (Findings 1 through 5 and Recommendations 1, 2 3, 4, 6 & 8)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Regional Occupation Program: Due 08/02/06 (Findings 1 through 4 and Recommendations 6)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Probation Department: Due 08/02/06 (Findings 1 through 5 and Recommendations 3, 5, 6 & 7)**
- **The San Luis Obispo County Board of Supervisors: Due 09/06/06 (Findings 1 through 5 and Recommendations 3, 5, 6, & 7)**